

## Hepatitis C

### What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). It is estimated that 4.1 million (1.6%) Americans have been infected with HCV, of whom 3.2 million are chronically infected.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

Symptoms of acute hepatitis C can include jaundice (yellowing of the skin), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, low-grade fever, pale stools, dark urine, and generalized itching. It is important to remember, however, that up to 80% of people who are infected with hepatitis C do not exhibit any symptoms and may not know they have it. If a person is exposed to HCV, symptoms may appear about 6 to 8 weeks later, but this time period can vary from person to person. Most HCV-infected people carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Approximately 70% of chronically infected persons develop liver disease.

### How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread mainly through exposure to infected blood and blood products. There are several ways a person has increased risk of becoming infected, including:

- Sharing needles or “works” when using illegal injecting and intranasal drugs
- Receiving a blood transfusion or organ donation from someone who is infected
- Being born to an infected mother
- Receiving long-term hemodialysis treatment

- Needlestick (ie tattooing, ear piercing)
- Needlestick or sharps exposure on the job
- Sexual contact with someone who is HCV positive

### Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

Certain groups of people who are more susceptible to HCV infection should be tested, including:

- Anyone who has ever injected illegal drugs
- People who were treated for clotting problems with blood products made before 1987
- People who were notified that they received blood from a donor who tested positive for hepatitis C
- People who received an organ transplant or blood transfusion before July 1992
- Long-term hemodialysis patients
- People with signs or symptoms of liver disease
- Health care workers who have been potentially exposed
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers
- Household contacts of persons who are HCV positive

### How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

There are several blood tests that can be done to determine if you have been infected with hepatitis C. Your health care provider may order just one or a combination of these tests.

### **Is there treatment for hepatitis C infection?**

There are two antiviral medications that can be used to treat hepatitis C; combination therapy with pegylated interferon and ribavirin is the treatment of choice resulting in sustained response rates of 40%-80%. (up to 50% for patients infected with the most common genotype found in the U.S. [genotype 1] and up to 80% for patients infected with genotypes 2 or 3).

Severe cases of HCV may require a liver transplant. Hepatitis C-induced end-stage liver disease is the most common indication for liver transplantation in the United States. People with HCV infection should avoid alcohol, and certain medications. Follow recommendations given by your health care provider.

### **Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?**

No, but people with hepatitis C should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B to avoid any additional liver damage from those viruses.

### **How do I prevent being exposed to HCV?**

Do not use injecting illegal drugs, do not share needles, do not share personal items (ex. razor, toothbrush) with an infected person, and use a latex condom to decrease the risk of catching or passing HCV through sexual contact.

For specific concerns regarding hepatitis C, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website: [www.dhhs.nh.gov](http://www.dhhs.nh.gov).